

Impact of a Short Foreign Sojourn on Willingness to Communicate and Confidence of Japanese University Students

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Abstract:

This research concerns the impact of a short-term study abroad sojourn on the confidence and willingness to communicate (WTC) of Japanese university students studying English as a L2. In this mixed-methods study, nine participants completed a pre and post-sojourn quantitative survey, and three of the nine were randomly selected for interviews to obtain qualitative descriptions of items of interest from the survey. The participants were students in a four-year private university enrolled in a teacher-training major and studying to become elementary school and junior high school (English) teachers upon graduation. During the 9-day sojourn, participants (in pairs) did a 5-day teaching practicum at a local American kindergarten or elementary school, and individually or in groups did a 7-day homestay. The results from the surveys suggest that anxiety related to speaking English was reduced, and that confidence and WTC increased after the sojourn. The participants also reported that interacting with children at their teaching practicum as well as their peer-partners seemed to be major reasons for this change.

Key Words: Anxiety, Confidence, Willingness to Communicate, Study Abroad, L2
Language Learning

Introduction:

How long is enough for study abroad to have an impact? This question is highly context bound for individuals, but more and more universities seem to be encouraging short-term study abroad programs in order to fit international experience into university students' busy schedules. Especially for students studying to be future English teachers in Japan, they have little time to go aboard between their teaching practicum, studying for tests to obtain teaching licenses, and completing required university coursework. In many cases with such busy schedules and school requirements, students only have time to do a short-term study abroad during spring vacation (February and March) or in the summer (August) when school is not session. However, the question remains, is it worthwhile to invest the time and money in such an

endeavor?

This study looks at whether a short-term study abroad sojourn can have an impact on Japanese university students who are not English majors, but plan to use English in their future career (in this case teaching). Fourteen students from a teacher training program at a private, 4-year Japanese university did a 9-day sojourn in Utah, USA where they participated in a 5-day teaching practicum either at local kindergartens and elementary school, and a 7-day homestay experience. This research measures the effect of the sojourn on the nine students who completed the pre and post-sojourn survey regarding affective language learning factors such as L2 confidence, anxiety, and willingness to communicate (WTC). Additionally, three students from the nine were randomly selected for interviews to obtain more in-depth answers from items of interest that emerged from the analysis of the survey.

After analyzing the survey and interview results, it was found that participant anxiety regarding speaking their L2 decreased after the sojourn, and confidence and WTC increased. Interacting with the children at the kindergartens and elementary schools seemed to have a particularly strong positive impact on participant confidence levels, and this in turn lead participants to relax and open up to host family members as they found they were more proficient in English than they had originally thought. Additionally, the participants reportedly benefitted from having peer-partners, that is being paired with a second Japanese student from the home institution, during the practical study. The following sections will describe a brief background of challenges regarding Japanese student WTC and mobilizing their English L2 knowledge, followed by the results and discussion of the current research.

Background:

Willingness to Communicate

There are many affective factors that influence L2 learning such as motivation, anxiety, and confidence to name a few, however this research paper investigated how a short (9-day) study abroad sojourn can affect student willingness to communicate (WTC). In second language learning research, WTC is defined as “a readiness to enter into discourse at a particular time with a specific person or persons, using a L2” (MacIntyre et al., 1998, p. 547). Many different factors can influence WTC. For example, Cao and Philip (2006) found that factors such as “group size, familiarity with interlocutor(s), interlocutor(s)’ participation, familiarity with topics under discussion, self-confidence, medium of communication and cultural background” work together to influence WTC in L2 learners (p. 480). WTC has also been found to be influenced by individual factors, such as proficiency level, anxiety, social context, confidence, and a variety of other social factors (Cao & Philip, 2006). In this sense, WTC is considered a dynamic construct, rather than a static one, and depending on the environment an individual is in, their WTC could change. Findings related to L2 learner WTC have been documented both in the classroom (Khajavy et al., 2017; Mystkowska-Wiertelak & Pawlak, 2014; Osterman, 2014; Peng, 2019) and outside the classroom (MacIntyre & Legatto, 2010; MacIntyre, Burns, & Jessome, 2011). WTC also has a connection to student self-perception of competence, and how likely they are to communicate with locals in their study abroad destination if they have a high WTC prior to departure (Yashima et al., 2004).

With many potential factors affecting WTC in L2 learners, it is necessary to narrow the context for the purposes of this paper. As this research concerns Japanese students studying English as a L2, the following will concern this particular group.

Willingness to Communicate Among Japanese Students Studying English as a L2

In the case of Japanese learners of English, Japanese students are generally not encouraged to practice speaking skills in school, and thus are often ill-equipped to handle communication in live situations. The grammar-translation method of instruction is still commonplace in Japan, and is reported to be a major demotivating force for students when studying English (Falout, Elwood, & Hood, 2009). With the focus on translation rather than communication, Japanese students often focus on using English for tests rather than considering it a tool for communication. Yashima et al., (2004) points out, “many Japanese adolescents, preoccupied with preparing for entrance exams to higher education, concentrate on raising test scores by memorizing vocabulary/idiomatic expressions and practicing sentence translation. These activities are of some value for improving L2 proficiency, but under these circumstances, ‘communicating with people in the world’ as a goal of EFL may seem somewhat unrealistic” (p. 121). Indeed, with the goal of communication in Japanese education focused on testing, it is understandable that students often find it difficult or have reluctance to speak when faced with real-world situations.

Even when Japanese students are taught with a more communicative approach in the classroom, research has shown that student WTC does not necessarily improve. Sick (2001) observed that 248 Japanese high school students’ WTC did not significantly increase after a year of instruction using communicative activities. First-year university students surveyed by Okayama et al. (2006) also did not see an increase in WTC after a one-semester English course. In Chen’s (2003) case study of a Japanese and a Korean student studying in the US, it was reported that the Japanese participant was hesitant to speak out in the American classroom due to the lack of discussions in the participant’s Japanese high school classroom. The participant reportedly had a tendency to “think deeply before talking” (p.265) or “say little rather than say too much” (p. 267), and thus displayed a reticence to speak due to her educational upbringing. This is not to say that Japanese students are innately shy and are incapable of communication (Shao & Gao, 2016), however, the classroom does not seem to be particularly effective for bolstering WTC among Japanese students.

When long or short-term study abroad is undertaken by students, research has shown that students often have higher WTC in comparison to students who only study in the classroom. Yashima and Zenuk-Nishide (2008) conducted a study of 165 Japanese high school students in a global issues course where some of the students went abroad, and some remained at home. The study abroad group displayed a nonsignificant increase in L2 WTC, where the stay-at-home groups actually showed a non-significant decrease in L2 WTC. Yashima and Zenuk-Nishide (2008) concluded that the WTC scores in the study abroad groups were higher than the WTC stay-at-home groups, showing an edge for study abroad groups regarding WTC. Other studies revealed that satisfaction from a study abroad could be obtained for Japanese high school students if they were able to take initiative when communicating with host families or locals, and

were open to sharing their thoughts and feelings (Yashima & Tanaka, 2001). In this sense, study abroad can be a catalyst to help unlock student WTC by providing a scenario that students can use English in a meaningful way that classroom learning cannot offer.

Current Research

From the literature review in the previous section, it can be seen that study abroad or short-term sojourns abroad have the potential to unlock WTC in Japanese students studying English. The current research measured the impact of a 9-day sojourn in the United States on WTC and English confidence of nine Japanese university students. This study consists of a mixed methodology using pre and post-sojourn surveys, and interviews to collect qualitative explanations from the participants. The research question for this research was as follows:

RQ1: What was the impact of the a 9-day sojourn in the US on Japanese university students' WTC and L2 speaking confidence?

Method

Participants and short-term sojourn

Fourteen female, Japanese university students participated on the 9-day sojourn to the us. Thirteen of the students who participated in the sojourn were rising 4th years as the sojourn took place during the spring vacation between semesters, and one student was a graduating student. Students were between 21 and 23 years of age. The students were in a 4-year college course focused on Early Childhood Education, and upon graduation would receive elementary and junior high school (English) teaching licenses. The participants' English ability is around Eiken pre-second level. Of the fourteen students who went on the sojourn, nine students from the sojourn completed both pre and post-sojourn surveys, so five students (including the graduating student) were not included in the final survey analysis. Of the nine participants, four had never left Japan before, and seven had never done a homestay.

The program was organized by the home university and designed specifically for students in the Early Childhood Education major. The program consisted of the first night with students in a hotel, from the second night students stayed with a host family for seven days, and then completed the final night in a hotel. In some cases, the students stayed by themselves in the homestay, and in some cases up to four students were present in a single homestay residence.

In addition to the homestay, the program featured a five-day practical training (beginning on the third day after arriving in the US) where the Japanese students taught in local schools. Students were placed in different classrooms ranging from kindergarten (5-year olds) to 5th grade in elementary school. In every case, no student was alone in the classroom, and always had a partner from the home university with them, which was pre-determined by the organizer of the program. During the practical training, the participants taught the American students about Japanese culture such as origami, traditional Japanese stories, and observed American classes. Students prepared the materials and stories prior to departure.

With only nine participants in the survey, the researcher acknowledges that there are insufficient participants for strongly reliable quantitative results. Due to this lack of quantitative power, the researcher added the follow-up interview to add qualitative depth to this study in order to elucidate large differences in the pre and post-sojourn survey data.

Materials

Materials used in this study included a pre and post-sojourn questionnaire, as well as a follow-up interview with randomly selected students.

The pre and post surveys used in this research were created using a modified version of a survey from Yashima et al. (2004) focusing on interest in English and WTC, and also included one measure from Tanaka & Ellis (2003) to measure participant confidence. The survey was modeled using survey questions used in investigation 1 in Yashima et al. (2004) which was designed to examine whether “Japanese learners’ WTC results in L2 communicative behavior in intercultural contact situations both inside and outside the classroom” (p. 126) using different measures. The measures selected for this study included motivational intensity, desire to learn English, interest in international vocation/activities/foreign affairs, willingness to communicate in English, communication anxiety, perceived communication competence in English, and frequency of communication. Such factors were selected because Yashima et al. (2004) found that high confidence pre-study abroad could impact WTC. As Yashima et al. (2004) was concerned with high school students in Japan and classroom learning, survey questions for this study were altered to fit the current context with university students. As student confidence was not measured in the Yashima et al. (2004) study, the researcher also added 3 items related to confidence taken from Tanaka & Ellis (2003) to assess how the sojourn affected English speaking confidence. The researcher suspected that confidence would impact WTC based on the results of Yashima et al. (2004).

In total the pre-sojourn survey consisted of 31 items (two yes/no items, four open-ended questions, and 25 6-point scale items) and the post-sojourn study consisted of 36 items (one yes/no item, five open-ended questions, and 30 6-point scale items). The pre-sojourn survey dealt with participant expectations regarding how they expected the sojourn to be, and the post-sojourn survey recorded student feelings and attitudes about the sojourn retrospectively. The items were distributed among several categories:

Table 1: Survey Item Categories

Category	Pre-sojourn survey	Post-sojourn survey
Background	2 items	2 items
Confidence	3 items	3 items
Motivational Intensity	4 items	4 items
Desire to Learn English	6 items	6 items
Anxiety and WTC	(added in the next 3 sections)	(added in the next 3 sections)
About the sojourn in general	7 items	7 items
Practical training at school	4 items	6 items
Homestay	5 items	8 items

The post-sojourn survey had slightly more items than the pre-sojourn survey in order to examine additional specific information about the sojourn. However, the pre and post-sojourn surveys were intentionally kept as close as possible only changing the tense of verbs from future (pre) to past (post) to make it easy to compare results. Each survey item was written in both English and Japanese, and the survey was conducted via Google Forms.

Additionally a follow-up interview was conducted. Three participants were randomly selected for the interview. The interview focused on frequency of communication with different people during the sojourn, anxiety related to English, and L2 speaking confidence during the sojourn. Each interview lasted approximately 30 minutes, and was conducted with each participant individually online via zoom. The interview was conducted by the researcher in Japanese.

Procedure

Different parts of the study were administered at different times. The pre-sojourn survey was administered in January 2020 prior to the participants' departure for their sojourn in February 2020. The post-sojourn study was administered in April 2020, after the participants' returned from the sojourn. The researcher then analyzed the data using Microsoft Excel and the descriptive statistics function in the program. Due to the small viable sample size, the researcher identified the parts of the survey that seemed to have the largest discrepancies between the pre and post-surveys, and conducted three interviews with randomly selected participants to get qualitative data regarding those specific topics of interest. The interviews were conducted in May 2020.

Results

High Pre-departure Anxiety

While the majority of the surveys reported minor increases or decreases in mean score (less than 0.3) from pre to post-sojourn, communication anxiety was the largest category of change. In the pre-departure survey, participants reported high anxiety about several factors such as speaking English in general, interacting with the students and teachers at school, and also interacting with the host family. However, upon returning, there was a major shift showing that the participant pre-departure stress was unwarranted. As can be seen in Table 2 below, pre-departure anxiety seemed to be rather high, but the students did not seem to have issues during the sojourn. On this 6-point scale, a '6' represents a strong yes, and a '1' a strong no.

Table 2: Participant Anxiety

Question	Pre-sojourn		Post-sojourn	
	mean	stdev	mean	stdev
Q3: It is possible for me not to get nervous when speaking English.	2.88	1.45	4.22	0.97
Q25: I am nervous that I will not be able to communicate with the students. (Post: I was able to communicate with the students)	4.66	1.22	5.55	0.53

Q28: I am nervous about staying with a host family. (Post: I was nervous when staying with a host family)	4.33	1.32	3.33	1.93
Q29: I think a problem will arise in the home that I cannot solve. (Post: A problem arose in a home that I couldn't solve.)	4	1.41	2.44	1.33

As can be seen from the results in Table 2, item 3 (Q3) shows that after the short 9-day experience in the US, there was a 1.34 point shift in anxiety related to English speaking. Also, in item 25, though students were very nervous about being able to speak with the students (children) prior to departure, in fact, they actually thought they were able to communicate quite well afterwards. In fact, in all of the interviews, participants reported that students (kindergarten and elementary school) were the easiest people to talk to during the sojourn because they directly told the participants when they did not understand what was said, and also were patient while the participants took time to formulate their answers.

The homestay was also a source of great pleasure for most of the participants. The survey results (Q28, Table 2) show that the participants were generally more nervous going into the homestay than was actually the case when they arrived. Participants reported that the situation was less stressful than they anticipated. Further, participants were worried that issues would arise before they got to the homestay that they could not solve (Q29, Table 2), but in fact their communication skills were sufficient to solve any issues that occurred. One participant did report an unsatisfactory experience in her homestay, however it was due to the host family not spending much time at home rather than a communication issue.

Increased Confidence and Interest in English

Another noticeable change between the pre and post-sojourn surveys was higher confidence in speaking English. As can be seen in Table 3, Q15 shows an increased interest in English comparatively to other subjects after returning from the sojourn. Also, confidence in English communication ability (Q27) shows that prior to departure participants expressed low confidence (2.88), however upon returning reported relative success (5.00).

Table 3: Participant Interest and Confidence

Question	Pre-sojourn		Post-sojourn	
	mean	stdev	mean	stdev
Q15: I find studying English more interesting than other subjects.	3.66	0.8	4.56	0.89
Q27: I am confident that I will be able to communicate my needs to my host family. (Post: I was able to communicate my needs to my host family).	2.88	1.05	5.00	0.71

The two items displayed in Table 3 show noticeable change between pre and post-sojourn surveys, so the researcher inquired into confidence and interest in English during the interviews.

One thread that was common among all three interviewed participants was that working with a Japanese student-partner and interacting with the children during the sojourn were major points that increased their confidence and interest in English. As for working with partners, two of the three participants said that having a partner present to work with in the classroom gave a familiar presence to rely on that encouraged

them to be more out-going. One participant expressed that during the first few days of sojourn when she didn't understand what was being said to her, she would simply act like she understood by saying "yes" or "I understand" to try to close the conversation quickly and escape the situation. When she confessed this to her partner, the partner told her that she could do better and "scolded" her, giving the participant some pressure to re-examine her behavior. After this conversation, the participant said that her confidence went up as she was more determined not to run away from conversations, and found that she actually could understand the conversation (especially with children) if she relaxed and concentrated. This same phenomenon was also reported in another interview with a different participant, however this time it was reversed. She scolded her partner (a different pair), and reported telling her to be more self-reliant. From the interviewee's perspective, this impacted her partner's behavior in a positive way which made her act more self-sufficient and confident. In other words, she did not rely on the interviewee as much.

Additionally, all interviewed participants reported that interacting with children was easier than interacting with adults, and that talking to the children made them more comfortable speaking English. The children were reportedly used simpler language than homestay parents or teachers, and also adjusted their talking speed so that the participants could better understand them. It seemed that this had a large impact on confidence for all three interviewed students.

Discussion

RQ1: What was the impact of the a 9-day sojourn in the US on Japanese university students' WTC?

Overall, from the reported decrease in anxiety, and evidence of increased confidence from the surveys and interviews, the sojourn seemed to have a positive impact on participant WTC. It seems that before departing, students were unsure of what to anticipate abroad, and whether their English ability was sufficient to overcome hurdles. As was observed in Chen (2005) the students seemed to be thinking deeply before speaking. Additionally, students seemed anxious about losing face. They reported in interviews that they would rather act like they understood and ask their partner rather than actually understanding. This period of acclimation and uncertainty seemed to persist for the first few days of the sojourn when students struggled to understand English and interact with the people around them. However, at some point during the sojourn, as reported in the three interviews and also evident from the reduced anxiety in the surveys, participants came to the realization that they could understand the American interlocutors and they could be understood. In most cases this seemed to be with children at the elementary school who took time to spend time and interact with the participants.

Two of the three participants interviewed also reported that over the course of the 7-day homestay, they approached host family members more regularly than in the beginning of the stay, indicating an increase in WTC. The third interviewee reported that she was relatively comfortable talking to the family from the beginning, but this could also be because she had previous experience traveling abroad and participating in a homestay.

One more item from the data worth noting that seemed to impact WTC was the participant-partner pairs. In most cases, students that study abroad do so individually, and while they may make friends on

the program, partners are rarely explicitly assigned. In this case however, since the students participated in class and taught some lessons about Japanese culture, they had a partner they knew well and prepared with prior to the sojourn. This bond seemed to allow students to be frank with each other both offering encouragement to try harder, and also have a peer to do comprehension checks about English meanings. In this case, it seemed that two heads were better than one and scaffolded student acclimation into the sojourn, and facilitated WTC.

Conclusion

From this research it can be seen that short-term sojourns in foreign countries can have a positive effect on student confidence and WTC. In this case, the participants returned from the 9-day sojourn in the US after their practical study and home stay with reported reduced anxiety speaking English, increased confidence, and more willingness to communicate with L2 interlocutors. From the interviews, it seems that interactions with children seemed to especially have an impact on participant confidence and WTC, as well as having peer support in the form of partners during their practical training and the homestays.

The limitations of this research are the small participant size, with only nine students having completed the pre and post-sojourn survey. While interviews were conducted with three of the nine participants to obtain more qualitative data to supplement the quantitative data with the small participant pool, the researcher acknowledges that this study should be done on a larger scale to have more conclusive results.

One unexcepted finding in this study, and one that warrants more study, is the impact on peer language partners from the same L1 on L2 language learning in a L2 environment. Usually study abroad research focuses on individual students while abroad drawing on support from programs informally as they adjust to the new study abroad environment, but not from formally paired L1 peer partners. This could be a means of scaffolding particularly anxious or beginner learners as they adjust into a new culture.

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